

Rug Hooking

Alice Moores, Red Bay

Researcher: Dale Jarvis

L'Anse-au-Loup, 2008

Courtesy of the Heritage Foundation of
Newfoundland and Labrador

Dale Jarvis: Were you born in Red Bay?

Alice Moores: Well, I was born on the coast. I wasn't born in Red Bay; I was born in Forteau.

DJ: When did you move to Red Bay?

AM: When I was a baby! I was only in Forteau long enough to be born and spend a few days there until I was well enough to go home. I've been in Red Bay since then.

DJ: How long have you been involved in rug hooking?

AM: Rug hooking has been something new for me in the last few years. I've always seen rug hooking—my mother always rug-hooked—but I never really had an interest in it 'til about eight, ten years ago, something like that.

DJ: When your mother hooked rugs, what did she use them for?

AM: Traditionally rugs were hooked for the Grenfell Mission, and most of the rugs that she did, she did for that. But they also did rugs that they put on the floor as well, just rugs to throw down around. Mostly what I would see my mother make is poked mats.

DJ: Okay, so what is the difference?

AM: Well, those two types of mats are very fine as you can see. The traditional Grenfell mat is hooked with a silk material, or t-shirts or whatever they could find, but the poked mat was just large pieces of rag poked through large holes in large brin. So they would just take a hook which didn't have the hook on the top, but was just straight,



Dale Jarvis interviewing Alice Moores. L'Anse-au-Loup, 2008. Courtesy of Dale Jarvis

and they would poke the piece of material through the hole, so that it was tight. It wouldn't come back, but it would have long pieces of rag on the top. And so that, they would throw on the floor. But those here were more used, or more hooked to be used as displays, or people put it on their chests, or things like that. Sometimes it was used on the floors but not often.

DJ: And where would people get the brin?

AM: The brin I guess was found...I'm not sure where they would find the brin back then. I guess it was potato sacks. First when the mats were being made, it came about because of Sir Wilfred Grenfell, who thought it would be a good way for the women to add to the income of the household, because the men were doing what they could with the fishing, and he found that this was a way that the women could, in the beginning, get clothes for their children. Because what was happening was, people were very poor and it was very difficult to be able to get things for their families. So they would do the mats for Sir Wilfred Grenfell and the Grenfell Mission and in turn they would

send in clothes and different things the women could use for their children. Now a little bit later they started to get paid for them. And so he would send in materials, and probably in the beginning he was sending in the brin as well, but then as time went on they probably used potato sacks and they would wash those out and clean them up, and they would use that.

DJ: Were there certain designs that were traditional?

AM: Well, the more traditional designs would be the dog teams and local scenery, different things like that. But a lot of them in the beginning were already drawn out, and sent in on the brin for the women to do. When this mat that is laid in front, the dog team, is what they would call a sampler. So people would do the sampler first. Samplers were mats that had some kind of a little defect in them. Whatever it was, they weren't up to the standard that was needed to be sold, and so they would use those as samplers. So they would send in the mat with the picture drawn on it and the materials needed to hook the mat and they would send in a sampler that was already done so you knew the colours that had to go in certain places in the mat. So that is how they would do them.

DJ: So the Grenfell Mission would almost do up like a little kit that they would send out to the women?

AM: Yes.

DJ: Was that the type of mats that your mother made?

AM: Yes, she would. Now sometimes they drew up their own designs, too, and did mats as well. I was just looking at a mat a couple of days ago, in a book, that my mother did, with a husky in it. The picture was drawn by a teacher who lived with us when I was only six years old. He drew the picture out on the brin for her, and she did the mat. So, yes, sometimes it was locally drawn and more times it was brought in.

DJ: You have another mat here that is more of a floral pattern. This is an older mat as well?

AM: This is an older mat and it's more traditional, with the scrolls, the

traditional scrolls. Those mats were done more as floor mats. So these were mats that they would do, and just throw them on the floor. This was done by an older lady in Red Bay. She is deceased now, but her daughter passed it on to my mother, and me having an interest in matting and the older mats and traditional matting, she passed it on to me. So this is some of the more traditional designs that would be used for floor mats in Red Bay. If you look at it, you can see that it actually is a worn mat, so this probably did spend some time on the floor of this lady's house.

DJ: The material that was used, you said it would be t-shirt material or silk material?

AM: It would be. They used the silk hose, the silk stockings. Traditionally, they would go looking for those, and Dr. Grenfell would go pretty much any place he could find them. In England, he would be after the ladies to give him their old silk stockings. They used the t-shirts and any old stretchy, anything that would stretch. It would have to be something that they could cut into little strips, and then when they pulled it, it would roll. And so they made their little strips of material and they hooked it into their rugs.

DJ: So why did you get interested in hooking?

AM: Probably, as I said, about eight or ten years ago. It was just an interest that I had. I've always had that interest. But about that time, I think it was in a discussion with my mother. We were talking about how a lot of the traditions were being lost, a lot of the old skills. I felt that it would be a nice one to learn, and I just got her to show me how it was done, and I just picked it up from there and I just loved working at it. That is how it got started for me, the interest in preserving the skill.

DJ: Do you remember the first mat you made, what kind of design it was?

AM: The first mat I did I think was a polar bear, and I was quite pleased with how that turned out, and a lot of the ladies told me that I did very good work, so that was encouragement for me to continue. The first one I did was a polar bear.

DJ: What kind of designs do you tend to do now?

AM: I tend to do local pictures and have a tendency to take pictures around the community and particular landscapes and houses and things like that, and then I draw the mat out myself. I take the picture and then draw it out and that is the one I hook. I



Mat hooked in Red Bay c.1970s from a kit supplied by Grenfell Mission. Design by Stephen Hamilton from the collection of Clarice Blake Rudkowski.

Courtesy of Clarice Blake Rudkowski

hooked one a few years ago of a stage in Red Bay, and I was quite pleased with it. I actually sold it and the person who bought it was a tourist to Red Bay. He went into the store where it was hanging and when he saw it, he said "I just came from this particular area in Red Bay and I saw that stage." So that to me was validation that I had the true picture of that building in the mat. So that is what I try to do.

DJ: Could you walk me through the steps, from start to finish, of how you would do a mat? What would you do first?

AM: Well the first thing you'd have to do is actually sew it into a frame. Now my frame is a little bit different that I have here today. The wooden pieces on top and the bottom are traditional. There would be another wooden piece on each side. Now I use a different one, because I find this helps me keep it tight. But you would use traditional pieces here. Then you would sew your mat in. So you would have a piece of fabric on the top piece of wood and on the bottom, and you sew your brin into a piece of material that is stapled or nailed to your piece of wood. Then you lace your mat in on the sides, so that the smaller strips that are on the side, your mat would be laced in there. This is what keeps your mat tight. You tighten it so you have a nice tight surface. Then once you get it into the frame you decide what you want to put in your map. You draw out your border and your picture. Once that's done you start with your border and you start to work back and forth.



Hooked mat from Red Bay, 1957. From the collection of Clarice Blake Rudkowski.

Courtesy of Clarice Blake Rudkowski

go and in some places where you have some detail you can actually outline your object or whatever it might be, before you actually do it. Then you fill that in, then you pick up on the other side and go on again.

DJ: What is the tool that you use to create it?

AM: You use what was known as a mat hook. The traditional mat hook is a piece of wood with a nail driven up into it. It's filed down and you put a hook on the end of it. Nowadays, a lot of people are using what is basically the end of a crochet hook for a mat hook. I've never been able to use it. I started out with the traditional type of hook and I've always stayed with that type of hook. This is a mat hook that I use, and this mat hook was made by my husband. That is what the men would do. They would make the mat hooks for the women. It is held in the palm of your hand. So you put your mat hook in your hand. One of my concerns, I guess, right now, is that there are a lot of people who are doing mat hooking, but a lot of them are not doing it in the traditional fashion. They are learning a style from outside this particular area, and they hold their mat hook a different way, and they are not using the traditional mat hook. They are using the one that has the crochet hook on the end. I notice a lot of them now are hooking this way, rather than the traditional way, again, getting

The traditional Grenfell style of mat hooking is hooked in this direction, which is from right to left. You start over here and work your way across and when you get over here you stop and start back over here, one line at a time. You change colours as you

back to keeping the traditional skills that were used.

DJ: Does changing the way you hold it have an impact on the final product? Does it look different at the end?

AM: It makes the loop a little bit different, when it is pulled up. I think it does. It doesn't give you such a fine loop in your finished product, as it does when it is done in a traditional loop.

DJ: So once you finish the mat on the frame, what is the next step?

AM: Well the next step then is to take it out of the frame. So you have to cut it out of the frame and you trim around the edges outside. Then you have to sew your brin into the back of the mat, so you have a nice clean finish. Traditionally we were always told that to have a good quality mat, your mat should look almost as good on the back as it does on the front. You should have a nice clean finish.

DJ: How long would it take you to do a smaller mat, this sort of placemat size?

AM: It is really hard to say because most women who mat hook, you have a mat in a frame and you sit down and work on it for half an hour, fifteen minutes, an hour, whatever, then you move on to something else. Then when you get a bit of time you come back and sit down to it again. I'm not sure what it would take. I guess it would probably take three, four, five hours if you worked constantly at it. It is very intensive and you're bent over doing this work. It does get tiring on the back after a while. But it is very worthwhile and I always find that as you are doing it, and as you are coming up on your mat, you are creating a picture. Sometimes you have a picture on the brin and you'll get so far and you'll decide, well, maybe something else would look nice in there, so you add a little something. So you are creating as you are going, I always find with mats.

DJ: How has the tradition changed, do you think?

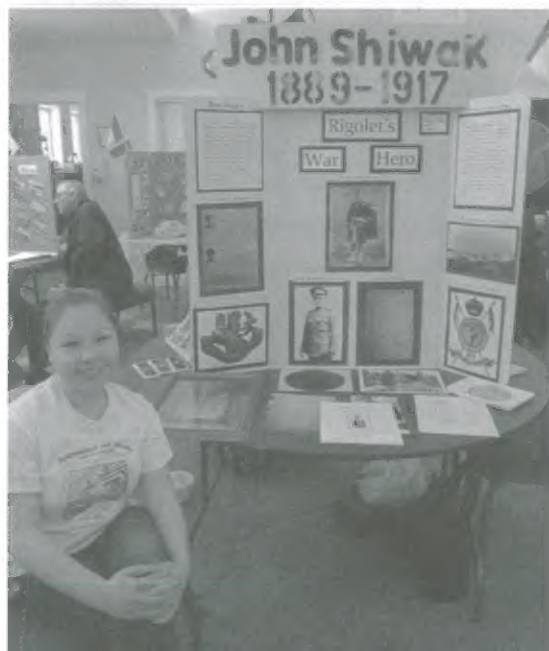
AM: People are probably doing a little bit differently in sceneries. There is not so much of the dog teams anymore. There are still some people that do the dog teams, and as I just mentioned, the way of doing it has changed a little bit. That concerns me because I think we should keep

the traditional way of doing it, and the traditional way of hooking the mats. But otherwise, I think most people are staying pretty much to the traditional way. Materials may have changed a little bit. I tend to use more wool than I do the traditional materials. Some people are sticking to the t-shirts and the traditional materials. But other than that, it hasn't changed a whole lot.



Above: Veronica Flowers of Hopedale with her project on her grandmother, Andrea Flowers. Happy Valley-Goose Bay, 2013.

Aimee Chaulk photo



Left: Haley Flowers of Rigolet with her project on John Shiwak. Happy Valley-Goose Bay, 2013.

Aimee Chaulk photo